

State of mind of a practitioner becoming a reflective practitioner turning into a researcher

0. Abstract

This essay firstly states the 'Emergence of the Research Question',¹ which is embedded in a cultural context, metaphorically projected in the subtitle: 'The House and Every Creature in It'. For starting and continuing a PhD only makes sense if the assumed objectives are projected onto the multi-faceted surfaces of (a) society, hoping it will help the world go round (a little bit) further.

Furthermore, the chapter 'Life during Wartime' focuses on the triggers found in the individual context of the writer. There the essay becomes more personal, direct and grim, giving voice to the individual whereabouts and 'whatabouts' in the context of starting a PhD. This chapter is written in a dialogical format which might turn into a prose poem every now and then.²

'The Spatial and Temporal Awareness', as a final chapter, brings the discourse back to its assumed relevance in the cultural context and 'the use of it' in an (architectural) society. It makes explicit the intellectual incentives for going on with research and a PhD and how and why to communicate about it.

I. On a clear day you can see forever³

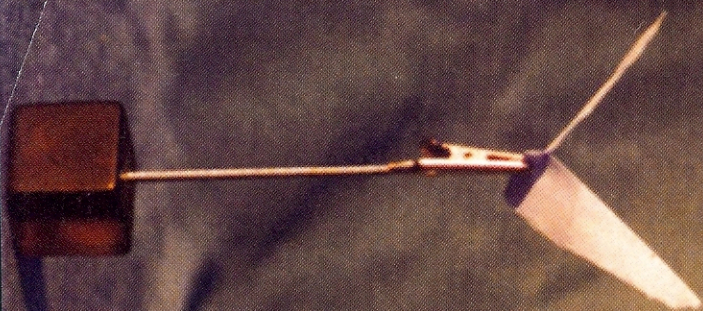
Is it the time of the year - the end of the summer - that makes one look back and reflect with a mingling of melancholy and expectation?

I feel the endless acres of the past stretching out behind me. I can see them when I turn my head to look back, and - on the spot and under my feet! - this vast and flat plain curves upwards into the mirroring surface of an enlightened future.

So here I am now, surfing on the ever moving section line of those two adjacent surfaces, simultaneously looking in every direction all the time - no time to sleep! - constantly switching modes of past and future, and at the same time being aware of the 'now', of the 'now' I '(k)now', and the next moment realising I am in another 'now' already, with another 'knowing' (knowledge) as an inevitable consequence.

I am in the middle of a MUTATION PROCESS of a special omnidirectional kind - like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly - with the ever present desire to keep on mutating in both directions at the same time, in order to be caterpillar and butterfly in one, or to preserve the possibility to change from the butterfly mode to the caterpillar mode and vice versa, whenever necessary or appropriate or dictated by circumstance or context....

It was the moment of rebirth of the intellectual self, a Renaissance of the mind, when I learned about the possible existence of more than one mode of knowledge. On a clear day you can see forever. Up till that day, I automatically took 'the one and only'



Mode 1 Knowledge of classical (natural) science (which I appreciate very very much – those who know me know very well I am serious about this)¹ for granted. Gradually though, while reading the recommended literature for the pre-session assignments for the RTs-session with Halina Dunin-Woyseth² and Fredrik Nilsson, I discovered the legitimate existence of Mode 2 Knowledge, and an awareness of possibilities, of 'something else' arose. It was as if I had heard music coming out of a room next to mine, but a room whose existence I did not realise before, like in a dream. It was surprising and shocking at the same time. After I had been in that room and after I had decided to move there and to stay there, 'having dinner with the parents of my intellectual self' would never be the same again. At last I began to feel at home'. And finally, I realised that a PhD might be a powerful and very effective joint between the horizons of past and future, linking innocence with experience with expectation.³ Thus I found myself at the end of 'my' summer, joining the world as it is – as a research subject in 'classical natural science' – with the world as it might be, through design....

II. The emergence of the research question

The **RESISTANCE** against the 'inhibitive factors of realism' and the **SURRENDER** to the 'liberating factors of the coincidental' (the collateral spin-off) combine a clearly recognizable characteristic and an ever more present undertone in my body of work.⁴

Or is this undertone becoming more and more an obvious and dominant sound in the foreground, an almost ideological declamation in the Agora, the Virtual Civic Spine,⁵ as a result of reflection and research? And by doing this, have we got the living proof that reflection and research **DO** start up new processes of design and research in/through design, with new unexpected outcomes and a substantially expanded knowledge as a result?

Quod erat demonstrandum?

Within the research question, which in essence investigates a (my) body of work, focusing on a never ending quest for 'THE REAL' in architecture by its own specific processes and the harsh resistance against every obstructing factor on its way, the following characteristics become obvious:

The **STRATEGY** of **RESISTANCE** and **SURRENDER** (cf. infra) and the **TACTICS** of the **SHIFT IN CONCEPTS** are the lenses through which I investigate (my) practice (in the broadest sense of the word – as I was already practicing as an architect at the age of three...),

looking for

the confirmation (**PROOF**) that the **REAL** can become visible by 'committing' architecture (in opposition to one post-political idea in architecture, firmly convinced of the inevitability of **ONLY REALISM***, directed and implemented by narrow market mechanisms

and for

design processes, -strategies and -methods driven by an awareness of the importance and the potential of the **CIVICS** and the **POETICS**, both as 'conditions sine qua non' when it comes to 'committing' architecture, and the **TECHNICS**, as an instrument and an inevitable competence to make the civics and the poetics materially possible, visibly explicit and experientiable.

The **SHIFT IN CONCEPTS** as flexible **TACTICS** in variable contexts plays a serving role in relation to the **STRATEGY** of **RESISTANCE** and **SURRENDER**.

As a consequence, one cannot delineate a recognizable 'style' in my body of work. One can rather make mention of reproduced – and thus reproducible – strategies and tactics in conceptions, design processes and (material) realisation processes (on building sites), which in their turn are very specifically and flexibly applicable in giving an answer to the research question of a PhD or a research question which is, basically, the subject of every architectural commission for me, as a practitioner, and for every architect (I sincerely hope so...?) in the context of his/her own practice.

III.

The house, and every creature in it

The cultural context

To us women and men of Sint-Lucas – and here only we are entitled to speak on behalf of ourselves – architecture has a mission (impossible?) to fulfil in the cultural landscape. It deals with and goes beyond utility and 'the daily'. It reaches beyond Realism to attain the Real.

"La littérature est réelle, elle n'est pas réaliste."⁶

Mutatis mutandis:

"L'Architecture est réelle, elle n'est pas réaliste".

Sint-Lucas represents a specific 'model of architecture' – although we are not very much 'into models' – as we prefer pluriformity to uniformity, and that's just what we proclaim.

We believe this model has a right to **EXIST** and a duty to **RESIST**. Because we are constantly receiving signals from a disappointed world, we know that our provocative propositions of the apparently impossible can heal, because we **[KNOW]** by **NOW** that our *intuition*¹⁰ informs us very well most of the time....

We realise that it is our duty to proclaim it in the Agora, our speakers' corner – some kind of political forum for cultural announcements! Let's indeed call this forum the **VIRTUAL CIVIC SPINE!** (cf. supra), because Architecture written with a capital

'A is about the CIVICS, convincing the world by POETICS, supported by splendid conceptions of the TECHNICS.

So I cannot imagine a cultural policy that would limit architecture to the safe conformity of the centre, pushing any approach that is different from the mainstream into marginality or even into a declared ghetto of illegality, by means of a staccato repetition of the so-called self censorship of 'realism': 'you've got to be a realist' while designing, otherwise we will...and you will not...and then it will be very hard for you to..."

I cannot imagine a future cultural landscape in which a model of architecture suddenly disappeared because of a change of mind in policy, dictated by a change of mind in public opinion with the tarnishing of cultural interest - a public opinion in its turn being ill informed because only driven by small-scale short-term perspectives of market mechanisms - following Milton Friedman and the 'Chicago School of Economics' focusing on monetarism, rational expectations and market fundamentalism - turning into short-term memory and short-time microeconomic perspectives, most of the time translated as: "What's the use of this project? Can I eat it, for instance? Will it give me instant gratification?"

Will I be handsome, will I be rich..."¹¹

Can architecture (only) rely on 'economy' as - on the other (economic) hand - the economist John Maynard Keynes states it: "In the long run, we're all dead..."¹²; and at the same time being aware of architects very often wanting to build for eternity... (and I think in some of the best cases they are right to do so, as stones remain and money can evaporate...).

So this is the core of my Reflection and the core of my decision to become a more and more reflective practitioner¹³: it is an ethical commitment to (the cultural) society. It is about keeping architecture, as a cultural actor with substantive impact, in the spotlight of exciting relevance, as it is about the intrinsic power of architecture being in charge of itself, rather than being a 'task force' commanded by somebody or something else. This is the issue that is at stake here.

IV. Life during wartime

The individual context

Was it the current phase in a lifetime?

Was it life during wartime?

Was it something unknown, feeling like a missing link, a hurting mind gap pushing him towards relief by reflection? And how to make the unknown un-known?

Was it reflection? Reflection on reflection on reflection?

Was it the mingling of expectation and despair in the eyes of homeless men and women, teaching us the essence of architecture by vast and wordless lessons in humanity?

Was it the way one couldn't get used to the way he looked at a built environment he couldn't get used to, not by any means whatsoever?

Was it the refusal - even the impossibility - to execute a silly order shouted by someone to someone else's ear, who had already decided to remain deaf a long time ago? Somewhere somehow a warrior was getting tired?

"I want to surrender".

"Surrender? You?"

"Yes, I surrender....", he whispered as if he knew this sombre annunciation sounded like the inadmissible breaking of a most precious crystal baby metaphor.

"Don't", she sneered back. Her lips were hardly moving. Her eyes (black bullets) predicted an angry argument, her words appeared to him like a spreadsheet of unreadable numbers and useless chemical formulas, rolling out of her mouth in a continuous flow of repulsion.

"Why? Why shouldn't I surrender?"

"Because you have to RESIST! Because the resistance is not only in you and all over you but in the whole of humanity, its history and actual behaviour! Because surrender is betrayal. Betrayal to yourself. Intellectual suicide! And that's the second last thing you can do. To yourself. To us. To them"

Hesitatingly, he started to talk back in Dutch. It sounded like speaking in tongues like a voodoo ritual (surprising, since he had just decided not to be a native Dutch speaker any longer).

'Soms is Architectuur het niet voltooide tafereel dat zich eenzaam afspeelt aan deze zijde van het lege Plein van de Dertigste November, het publieke forum waar vier straten die luisteren naar de namen Geluk, Malchance, Onmacht en Kracht samenkomen.

Onzekerheid heerst onder hen!

Pas op deze plek, op dit moment, komt het antwoord op de vraag welke straten hun namen mogen meenemen naar hun verder verloop vanaf gene zijde van het plein.

Ontstellend is de plotsse zekerheid van een bang reeds vroeg slimmerend voorgevoel.

Onaanvaardbaar? Godgeklagd?

Wie weet het antwoord?

Verkeerde straat, verkeerd nummer, verkeerd verbonden. No such number, no such zone.

Diep maar onafwendbaar is het besef dat elke kans, hoe vazig of scherp of stralend zij zich ook aandient, slechts éénmalig is. Dat zij dus gegrepen MOET worden.

Dat zij geen tweede keer langs komt.
 Dat de Stad en de Wereld deze kansen van toen, en evenzo
 de schitterende kansen van vandaag, en van morgen, niet naast
 zich neer mogen leggen. Niet negeren.
 Om het toekomstig verleden niet met een schuld op te zadelen.
 Om de Toekomst niet voor aap te zetten.
 Om zichzelf niet te degraderen.¹⁴

Next-door, somebody had put on the Lou Reed song, which
 came now very near to my ear:
 "How do you think it feels, when you are speeding and lonely?
 how do you think it feels, when all you can say is: if only?
 If only, if only, if only..."¹⁵

All of a sudden an irresistible flow of verbal magma was erupting out of his mouth
 in short, intense sentences, evermore growing into grammatical juxtapositions as
 an exhaustive description. He realised he couldn't stop himself, almost declaiming a
 manifesto:

*I oppose the 'if only remark'. STOP. I resist, so I exist. STOP. I
 oppose the inevitable forces of gravitation. STOP. I oppose the smooth
 and clean surfaces of bright polished architecture in glossy magazines,
 pretending architecture is about 'en vogue' – a dictate of how one
 should behave, presenting architecture as silly acrobatics of form and
 discourse, the fancy decorum of a temporary performance, show-biz
 entertainment by dandy architects, little strings manipulating them
 into the role of a figurant in a bad puppet play nobody wants to see.
 STOP. I oppose the good shows, Larry-statements. I refused to learn
 from Las Vegas.¹⁶ STOP. I oppose the 'do it again Sam - attitude'.
 STOP. I don't like the way we have to demonstrate how we can
 walk on our hands – I am more into falling on my face, graciously
 (or not), including the injuries and the pain afterwards... STOP.
 I oppose an architecture as an instrument of power and personal
 status, instead of an architecture as a magnificent autonomous
 machine, generating genuine wellbeing and cultural awareness for
 the human beings at stake. STOP. I oppose political correctness of a
 certain kind, translated into oversized legislation implemented by an
 ever friendly and PR-trained administration, designed as a market
 conform machinery and manned with civil servants docussed to
 marketers, in their turn docussating the civilian into a client in
 a cue in a marketed policy of which the only outcome is surrender
 to sinister censorship.¹⁷ STOP. I oppose the implicit statement that
 the realisation of an architecture has, by definition, to be the minor
 version of the dream.
 This is a call for Resistance! STOP.*

*I embrace the unexpected outcomes of coincidental phenomena
 popping up like collateral spin-off during the processes of design
 and material realisation in architecture. STOP. I embrace the way
 these phenomena enrich the embryo's possibilities, and the way they
 protect the embryo's initial (conceptual) brightness from fading into
 a grey conformity and a disillusioning outcome as expected. STOP.
 I embrace the attention an architect has to pay to the potential of
 accidents, rule violations, risks, stepping out of the matrix – the rage
 against the machine... STOP. I embrace the attitude that turns a
 problem into possibilities. STOP. I embrace grindstones. STOP. I
 embrace the human right to doubt. STOP. I embrace the attitude
 of angry young men. STOP. I embrace the squatter trespassing
 into the unknown kingdom of the unknown knowledge. STOP.
 I embrace the unallowed thought in a current domain. STOP.
 I embrace an architecture that is a provocative exposition of the
 apparently impossible. STOP. I embrace the 'what if...' – question,
 not being a question really, but rather feeling like an exclamation!
 [AHA: EUREKA!], a profound and lasting liberation of the dogma,
 opening up the doors towards the realm of possibility....¹⁸
 STOP.*

STOP.

STOP!

"Hoe staat het met de stand van je werk tijdens de censuur",
 vraag ik terloops.

"Niet echt verschillend met de stand van mijn werk voor de
 censuur", antwoordde jij bij wijze van voorzichtig automatisme,
 "al weet ik nu wel dat ik toen niet wist dat de censuur er gauw
 zat aan te komen", voegde je er nog flinjes aan toe.

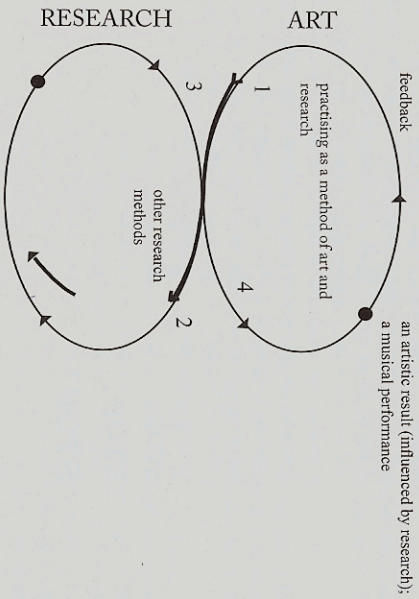
"Wat wil je", zei ik, "dit is 1938 en telkens als het 1938 is gaat
 dat zo".

[De staatsradio meldt zonet dat Oostrenrijk is aangesloten en dat
 vanaf nu alle kunst als ontaard zal worden beschouwd].

"Ik weet het", repliceerde je nu plots heftig en alert, "vier jaar
 geleden is het ook al eens 1938 geweest. En in 1973 is het zelfs
 een paar keer na elkaar 1938 geweest. De vraag is alleen – en dit
 maakt mij een beetje ongerust – als het nu zo vaak en zo kort na
 elkaar 1938 kan zijn, wordt het dan op de duur gewoon de hele
 tijd door 1938?"¹⁹

V. The spacial and temporal awareness of the messenger

So now is the time to explore and to inform, by going into the domain of the activity of architectural design, the domain we are devoted to and in which we spend (spent?) most of our lives. By going in there and by looking intensively, we can observe and make an analysis and a record. We can be a witness, and witnesses have memories. Witnesses can come back from those 'empirical' observations, bringing clear images and a sharp discourse back to the known land of the already attained knowledge, in order to speak out, to witness (as a verb) about what they have seen in the hidden kingdom of the unknown knowledge.



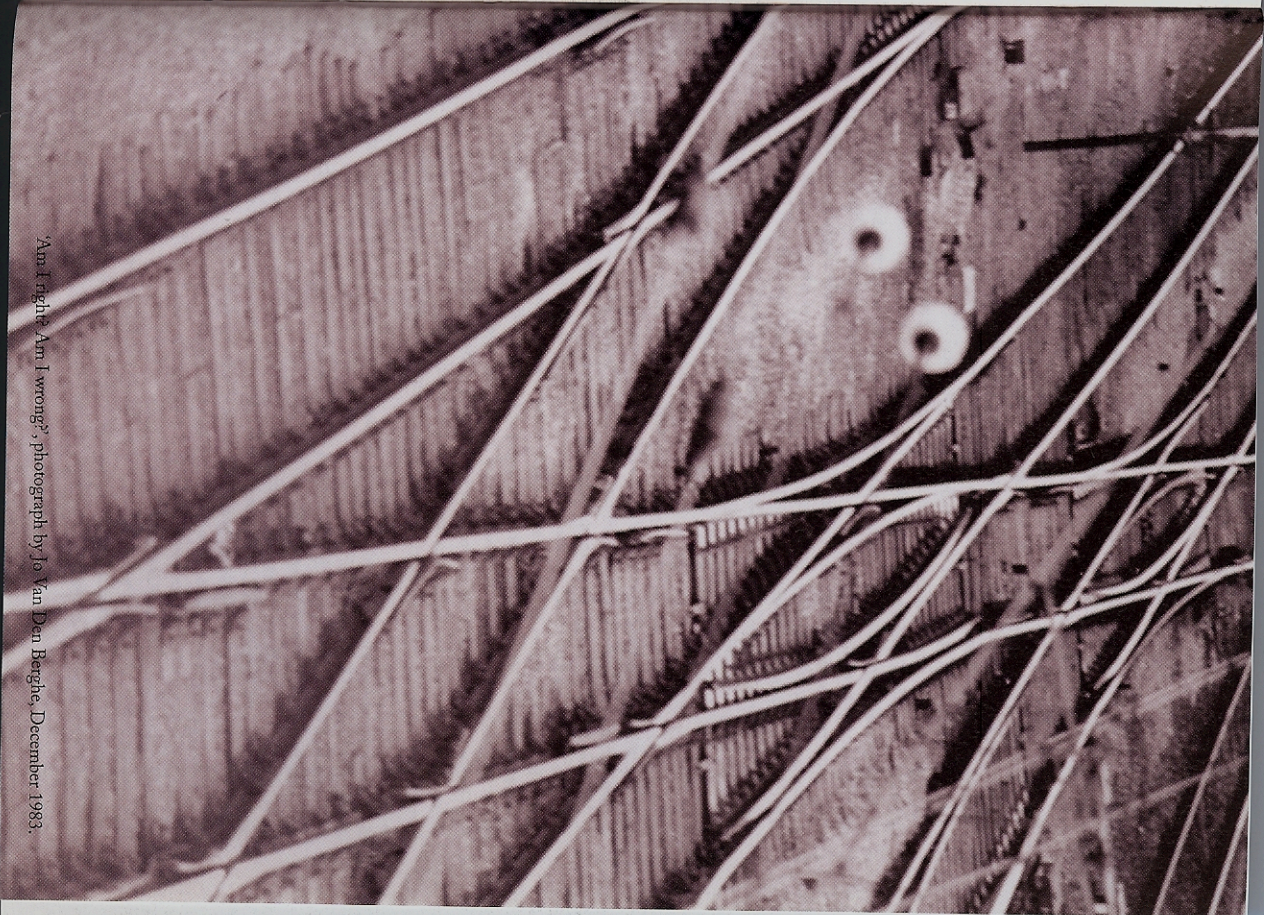
Design-research scheme by Kari Kurkela¹⁹

How privileged we are!

To proclaim what we could un-hide, to discover by research in/through design, as we are THE MESSENGERS, able to hand over that first-hand design information to society, and to hand it over from within the field: we who are the world's best informants when it comes to architecture, its processes, its endless possibilities to research, to try out, to fail and to doubt, to go beyond the realistic, to start a quest for the real, which can only be revealed through research, most probably also within ourselves, our own practices, our everyday processes, our delights and disappointments.

Brethren, I salute you! My fellow statesmen, my friends, my neighbours in the perimeter of the universe of knowledge! Because we are invited to explore the boundaries, an invitation we cannot refuse!

Jo Van Den Bergh



'Am I right? Am I wrong?', photograph by Jo Van Den Bergh, December 1983.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Hence the essay does not go all the way into the research question itself, which has not been described to the full extent here, as the author wants to focus on the state of mind surrounding the emergence of a research question, the 'conception of the embryo' and the further 'brooding on eggs'. Or is this a flow of subsequent states of mind coming together in a stream of consciousness....
- 2 RTS-session with Rolf Hughes at Sint-Lucas Brussels, 2007-02-08, 09, 10 and to his Essay 'The Hybrid Muse: Creative and Critical Writing in/as Practice Based Research', in 'The Unthinkable Doctorate', Sint-Lucas Brussels-Ghent, 2005, pp.101-114, in which Rolf Hughes demonstrates a whole range of language possibilities that can help us 'to give voice'.
- 3 An original musical play by Allan Jay Lerner and Burton Lane, adapted in a Paramount film directed by Vincente Minnelli, released on 1970-6-17.
- 4 *Scientia non habet inimicum nisi ignorantem*, as was written by somebody one day, on the inside of a sixteenth century spinet now on exhibit in the Gruuthuize Museum in Bruges. A very strong statement in an era of Reformation and upcoming Counter-Reformation, pointing to the importance of 'scientia', science, in opposition to 'wilful' ignorance as a possible product of dogma.
- 5 Halina Dunn-Woyse introduced the Mode 2 Knowledge to me in the second RTS session (2007-04-12, 13, 14). Moreover, different PhD concepts became clear during that session. As a consequence, 'autonomously' writing and designing a 'liberal PhD' [unthinkable?] became more obvious, instead of writing a classical PhD ['research is research in the fields of Theory, History and Criticism = thinkable'] or a pragmatic PhD ['that awkward half-way house', termed by Gillies and as such quoted and stated as dialogical by Halina Dunn-Woyse on page 86 of her essay 'The thinkable and the unthinkable' Doctorates. Three perspectives on Doctoral Scholarship in Architecture', in 'The Unthinkable Doctorate', Sint-Lucas Brussels-Ghent, 2005, pp.81-100]. In that session, Halina Dunn-Woyse opened up doors that should never be shut again.
- So Mode 2 is dealing with the world of artificial science (as Mode 1 is about natural science), in a world of artifacts rather than in a world of facts, with the actors more being inventors than scientists and dealing more with the world that might be (through design) than with the world that is (by discovery). (I refer to 'The Production of New Knowledge', Gibbons, Nowomny, et al., Sage Publications, London, 1994, and to what Levy-Strauss in 'Savage Thinking' describes as 'tinkering and bricolage' as a basic characteristic in the method of Mode 2, not always 'gauged, stamped and verified' as 'calibrated method' in classical (natural) science in producing Mode 1 Knowledge.
- 6 A line of thought which is also made explicit by William Blake's poetry in 'Songs of Innocence' (1789) and 'Songs of Experience' (1794).
- 7 Presentation of my body of work during the RTS sessions with Leon van Schaik, Design Research Seminar, Sint-Lucas Brussels, 2007-09-13, 14, 15.
- 8 From a dialogue between Leon van Schaik and Jo Van Den Berghe, at the end of the lecture given by L.v.S. on September 12th, 2007 in Sint-Lucas - Brussels, mentioned again on September 15th, 2007 after the last tutorial session, in café l'Archiduc, Dansaertstraat Brussels.
- 9 Peter Handke, *Le Monde* 04/06/2004: 'Le Regard de Peter Handke', quoted by Marc Beldenbos in his introductory essay: 'Introduction: Aborder "L'Impensable Doctorat"', in 'The Unthinkable Doctorate', Sint-Lucas Brussels-Ghent, 2005, pp.51-77.
- 10 Intuition: (power of) the immediate understanding, the speeding awareness of deeper *knowings*, often preceding the slower building - by reasoning - of correspondent tacit *knowledge*.
- 11 Extract from the song *Que sera, sera*, composed by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, performed

- by Doris Day, 1956.
- 12 The interventionist Keynesian macroeconomic concept does not seem to worry in the long run either...?
- 13 Donald Schön, 'Learning, Reflection and Change', Beyond the Stable State. Public and Private Learning in a Changing Society, Harmondsworth: Tenguin, 1973.
- Donald Schön, 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- 14 Extract from my lecture at the opening of the retrospective exhibition of the work of Architect Julian Lampens, in Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Ghent Belgium, on November 30th, 2006
- 15 Lou Reed, album 'Berlin', Track 5: 'How do you think it feels', New York, 1973.
- 16 Learning from Las Vegas: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Izenour, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. USA, 1977.
- 17 in casu: the limitation of the freedom of (architectural) speech.
- 18 Extract from my introductory lecture for the Arts Project about Martyrship and Censorship, Livinus 2007, with works of Honoré d'O, Martheu Ronse, Philippe Van Isacker, Hans De Pelmacker, Sint-Lievens-Esse, Belgium, July 2nd 2007.
- 19 Kari Kurkela, Sibelius Academy, Helsinki, Finland.